

**West Alabama Economic Summit
Wednesday, January 28, 2009
Bryant Conference Center
Mayor Walter Maddox Comments**

With an unprecedented housing crisis, lack of consumer confidence, and rising unemployment, from Wall Street to 15th Street, we gather here today in the midst of arguably the greatest economic challenge of our lifetimes.

My charge, this afternoon, is to provide a call to action.

Considering the leaders in this room, I doubt inaction will be an option.

So, understanding what our Governor and so many of our distinguished speakers have said, the real question is what type of action are we going to take?

Today, beyond the mere coldness of statistics, we are feeling this terrible pain of recession.

We have neighbors, we have church members, and we have friends and family who have either lost their jobs or are in economic distress.

Yes, we can point with a measure of some pride that Tuscaloosa will be spared much of this burden, and that our fellow communities in this state will have a much tougher road.

However, if you working at one of the businesses experiencing layoffs, how we compare to Birmingham, Mobile and Montgomery is irrelevant.

What is relevant is making your mortgage payment, buying your groceries and possibly saving for your children's future.

We have a lot of our fellow citizens who are scared and they're looking for real, meaningful action.

For years, the status quo was a comfortable position for Tuscaloosa that allowed governments, businesses, industries and our non-profits to carve out empires whose own self-interests, at times, were greater than the whole.

This includes the City that I love and have the honor of representing.

Over the past quarter century, because of the resourcefulness of our people, the status quo was still able to provide positive results.

However, our world, our country, our city is a different place.

We now live in a global environment where an idea transmitted onto the Internet can easily be transformed into a new, clean industry employing thousands.

Tomorrow's economy is knowledge based and without borders.

To be competitive in this new environment, we are going to have to think and act regionally and be willing to chart a different course in every sector of our economy.

As I see it, the call to action we must make is this: Do we seize this as an opportunity, or do we succumb to the comfortable path of the status quo?

In his second State of the Union Speech, I believe that Lincoln eloquently describes the crossroads we now face. He stated:

"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. "

I believe that acting anew begins with a regional and comprehensive approach to economic development so we can reverse the culture of fragmentation that will not serve us well in the future.

I believe that acting anew begins by making a significant investment into a regional K-12 career-technical program that can also strengthen our workforce development efforts and provide our students alternative pathways to high school graduation.

I believe acting anew means ending the suffocating red tape that discourages the entrepreneur spirit of this community.

I believe acting anew means coordinating with the University of Alabama, Stillman College and Shelton State to recruit knowledge-based industries to West Alabama.

I believe acting anew means that you, the leaders of this community, must hold us the elected officials, and those who serve on various boards and agencies, accountable; and when we fail to lead, we must be committed to demand change.

If we are willing to work together and look past our own self interests, while maintaining a forward focus, we can reshape our economic framework so that when this crisis subsides, West Alabama can emerge with more potential than ever before.

This task will not be easy; however, throughout history, it has been the moments of crisis that have brought about the best in this country's citizens.

So, here we are, the moment of truth.

Do we leave here determined to become involved and inspired to take this community from good to great?

Can we ask the tough questions and challenge the operational norms of our governments, agencies and non-profits?

In the final analysis, does this economic summit represent a starting point to think and act anew, or does it simply fade away as another meeting on just another day?

I believe this is could be an extraordinary day that can capture the promise of tomorrow because together, we are the difference.

By working together, we will be the difference.

Together, we will make sure our future, our children's future, our grandchildren's future better than it is today.